

# **Davidson's Metaphors: Desiderata for a Theory of Meaning**

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## I. Metaphor, meaning and rationality

1. Is a theory of meaning also a theory of rationality? In Donald Davidson's semantic programme, the two are inextricably bound up: it is only because our beliefs about the world are largely correct that we can make sense at all, and therefore all interpretation has to proceed from what Davidson alternately calls a 'principle of charity' and a 'constitutive ideal of rationality'. It is only when we can say under what conditions an expression in language would be true that we can say what it means; and such conditions themselves, of course, would be given expression in language as well. Accordingly, there are, in Davidson's ontology, no such entities as 'meanings' which connect words and ideas to the outside world: these words and ideas are element of the same world as what they are about, and their relation to their objects is causal. Only what makes words and ideas peculiar is that they can, in the guise of expressions and beliefs, be called true or false.

The question is appropriate, then, why and under what conditions these peculiar objects are liable to 'propositional ascription' – in less technical terms, what makes them identifiable as propositions and why only these can be called true or false.

2. Metaphor is one of the limit cases. In his paper 'What Metaphors Mean', Davidson has claimed that there is nothing metaphorical about what metaphors mean: what the expressions convey in terms of meaning is generally trivial, 'a patent falsehood or an absurd truth'<sup>1</sup>. What makes them metaphors is not something that can be characterized in terms of cognitive content, just as there are no semantic conditions that define a joke, and no descriptions that substitute for pictures.

If what the metaphor makes us notice were finite in scope and propositional in nature, this would not in itself make trouble; we would simply project the content the metaphor brought to mind on to the metaphor. But in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character.<sup>2</sup>

There can be no 'translation rules' for metaphor, because metaphors are made from quite the same words as other expressions and with no different meanings: the words become metaphorical only because they are *used* to produce a certain *effect*. It is this *effect*, and not a certain *meaning*, that is described in their interpretation.

Now the problem I perceive in this distinction between meaning and use is that the 'domain of use', to which, Davidson argues, the 'imaginative employment of words and sentences' in metaphor

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<sup>1</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 259

<sup>2</sup> *idem*, 263

‘exclusively belongs’,<sup>3</sup> falls outside the scope of the principle of charity. We can, of course, describe someone’s speech acts as reasonable, and must do so if we are to understand them as conveying meanings; but this applies only to the act of expression in so far as it is motivated by largely true beliefs. Now since Davidson’s theory of action treats motives as causes, what the principle of charity accounts for is that action, if it classifies as rational, is motivated and that its agent possesses a coherent set of beliefs. We can expect such motives to include knowledge about the possible effects an expression may have. But what is *not* covered by the principle of charity is the very capacity to generate metaphors, or to grasp them.

3. In several essays collected in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Richard Rorty has applauded Davidson’s negative account of what metaphors mean for showing that words can do more than mean. For Rorty, the capacity of language users to ‘transcend the cognitive and the meaningful’<sup>4</sup> is essential to rejuvenate the language game. ‘That is to say that they have no place in the language-game which has been played prior to their production. But they may, and indeed do, have a crucial role in the language-games which are played afterwards.’<sup>5</sup>

This reading, I think, is rendered dubious by Davidson’s later essay ‘Locating Literary Language’, in which he describes the effect of metaphor (and of literature at large) in terms of Fregean *force*. Starting from the assumption that ‘sentences express something only as used on particular occasions’,<sup>6</sup> he proceeds to argue that this use crucially depends on ‘first meaning’, and that

first meaning and what it may in specific circumstances implicate are not enough to fix the force of an utterance or writing. Indeed, force and first meaning are entirely independent, a fact which literature makes particularly clear.<sup>7</sup>

In this aspect, there is no difference between metaphor and other speech acts, such as asking, predicting, deceiving or insulting. Moreover, it is precisely on account of force that we can recognize an utterance or inscription as motivated, and so as a meaningful linguistic action.

Now the idea that poetry depends on the ‘force’ of the expression is to be found with Frege already. Davidson denies that the effect of metaphor must be explained in terms of meaning on the ground that its effect on the imagination is not, generally, propositional in character; but there are a whole lot of effects which language creates that are not themselves propositional in character. Is there a reason, then, why metaphor merits special attention?

Before I address this question in the next chapter, let me return to the initial problem.

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<sup>3</sup> idem, 247

<sup>4</sup> *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 169

<sup>5</sup> idem, 124

<sup>6</sup> *Truth, Language, and History*, 170

<sup>7</sup> idem, 172

4. It is not sufficient for an action to count as a speech act that it is motivated. Riding your bicycle is just as rational in terms of motivation as making an utterance. Now on top of claiming (in ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’) that there is no such thing as a conceptual scheme, Davidson has invited many misunderstandings in stating that ‘there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed.’<sup>8</sup>

In this seemingly counterfactual conclusion, ‘what many philosophers and linguists have supposed’ is that a language is governed by shared rules and conventions. Now speakers may be introducing a new name or predicate or kind term, they may use a word idiosyncratically, or they may just be making a slip of the tongue. All these cases can be well covered in a theoretical model of their linguistic competence without invoking ‘shared rules or conventions’. Models of linguistic competence aside, these seem to be only some unspectacular examples of language use flouting the standards of formal prose. But Davidson’s point is that it is the ‘passing theory’ of how the speaker’s expressions are structured, and not the ‘prior theory’ of what (a certain speaker’s) competence in a language consists in, that defines the standard which a semantic interpretation of these expressions must meet. It is only because people find it convenient to accommodate to each other’s verbal habits that we do not have to start from scratch time and again.

But then, still, why can’t we have such a passing theory cover someone’s dress, body language, or movement? Or what goes on in the imagination, for that matter?

5. It is crucial to Davidson’s theory of truth that the language we use is *translatable*: for every sentence *s* in the language *L* under interpretation, we have an expression *p* in a ‘metalanguage’ that names it. We construct such a metalanguage on basis of our own linguistic competence first from empirical observation of the circumstances in which *s* applies, and second from the identification of logical constants in the ‘object language’. Our theory of interpretation for *L* is ‘materially adequate’ and ‘formally correct’ if we can use it to say under what conditions *s* would be true. We do this in terms of a ‘T-sentence’: *s* is true in *L* if and only if *p*. The characteristic example of this is when the object language is identical to the object language – thus ‘*grass is green*’ is true if and only if *grass is green* – but this type of ‘translation’ is basic only in that it defines our own linguistic competence. When we are competent speakers of a language, we can use it to construct translations for other languages as well.<sup>9</sup>

(The formula for these T-sentences was first given by Alfred Tarski, which is why Davidson speaks of a ‘Tarski-style theory of truth’; but the characterization of linguistic competence in terms of this ‘Convention T’ is Davidson’s own.)

Now the net result of Davidson’s claim in ‘A nice Derangement of Epitaphs’ is not that this theory of truth must be abandoned, but that language becomes a theoretical construct. Whenever we interpret

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<sup>8</sup> idem, 107

<sup>9</sup> See ‘Radical Interpretation’ and ‘Belief and the Basis of Meaning’ in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

idiolects, malapropisms, ill-formed sentences and novel expressions, we translate them into a somewhat more familiar jargon, adapting our own jargon in the process if necessary. We cannot define a language with appeal to meaning, reference, rules and conventions, for these, Davidson argues, exist only relative to a language, not the other way round.

On reflection, the argument in ‘A nice Derangement’ turns out to be two arguments: one about novel expressions, and one about deviant use. For novel expressions, the argument is that the theory of truth ‘does not tell us how to apply the concept to new case, whether the new case is a new language or a word newly added to a language’ and therefore it gives no clue for distinguishing between the two.<sup>10</sup> For deviant use, the argument is that there are no rules for deviations, but still the deviation is in the *meaning* that is attributed to expressions and not in their *force* – and so we must accommodate deviant use to our theory of truth in an act of translation. But then, deviant use is not defined by its being outside the scope of *L* and so the distinction between normal and deviant use is only pragmatic.

## II. The Problem with Metaphor

6. Why does metaphor not classify as ‘deviant use’? After all, Davidson prompts us to lay down translation rules for malapropisms, idiosyncrasies and ill-formed sentences; to use some of his examples, that involves translating ‘allegories on the banks of the Nile’, ‘there’s glory for you!’ and ‘the plane will be landing momentarily’ as ‘alligators on the banks of the Nile’, ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you’ and ‘the plane will be landing in a moment’. So why should we *not* translate ‘the sun’s whirling veils’ as ‘the clouds’?

The difference, if we are to follow Davidson, is that metaphors are made of words, and that we must know the meaning of these words in order to grasp the metaphor. The phrase ‘the sun’s whirling veils’ does not *name* the clouds (as ‘glory’ names ‘a nice knock-down argument’, because Humpty Dumpty tells us so), and it does not *describe* the clouds, for it does not predicate anything over clouds. We cannot substitute ‘clouds’ for ‘veils’ either: why would just the veils be clouds, and not specifically those whirling veils, or the sun’s veils? Can all clouds be described as veils, some type of clouds, or only some clouds in a particular configuration? There is no answer. When ‘the sun’s whirling veils lift’ (or *drop*, or *ply*, or *rip* or whatever) something is said about *veils*, that have the property of lifting and whirling, and of belonging to some X, in this case the sun, but we could have taken Salomo for X as well. It is because the sun does *not* wear veils that the one is a metaphor and the other is not.<sup>11</sup>

The effect is the same as with the allegories, which do not live on the banks of the Nile as alligators do. But *here* ‘allegories’ *is* used to name alligators. If not, it would not be a malapropism. Mrs.

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<sup>10</sup> This point Davidson makes in *Truth and Predication*, 17

<sup>11</sup> We could, of course, ascribe to the sun’s whirling veils a property that is more appropriate to clouds than to veils – ‘The sun’s whirling veils shed rain’, for instance – but this would be translatable only if we took the subject phrase for a dead metaphor. Even then, we could still ‘revitalize’ the metaphor by talking of the subject phrase as a garment.

Malaprop uses the word 'allegory' to stand for 'alligator' like the aborigines use 'kangaroo' to stand for 'what do you mean?', and Germans use 'rot' to stand for 'red'. (The difference is that she does so in a slip of the tongue and will not say, when asked, that allegories are tree-like reptiles.) As for the plane landing 'momentarily', we know very well that the plane will not be landing 'for a moment' but 'in a moment', and that the speaker is not intending a pun. So in order to render his beliefs maximally coherent, we attribute him with a slightly inconsistent grammar.

7. Two of my friends used to store brown sugar in a peanut butter pot. When I asked, over a pancake, for the 'peanut butter', one told the other to pass me the 'heroin'. Although it was clear that the same thing was meant, I understood the pun only when they said there was a Rolling Stones song called 'Brown Sugar'. This little anecdote illustrates the difference between metaphor and deviant use. A radical interpreter knowing no Dutch could take the label on the pot to name the substance, and translate 'pindakaas' as 'brown sugar'. He could, as I could, grasp what 'heroin' stood for in this context without knowing the Rolling Stones song; as a radical interpreter, he could think that 'heroin' is a synonym for 'peanut butter'. But he would never grasp the metaphor in 'Brown Sugar' if he did not have words for 'brown' and 'sugar' (and in fact, the interpretation of 'brown sugar' as 'heroin' is still unconfirmed). Interpreting a metaphor, in this case, requires a prior knowledge of meanings that deviant use doesn't. We can translate Humpty Dumpty's idiolect without knowing what 'glory' usually means, because he has given us the clue. If we took 'brown sugar' (also) to mean heroin then the two meanings of brown sugar would be homonyms, and we could know the one meaning and be innocent of the other. Neither of these meanings would classify as 'metaphorical'.

8. If the conclusions from this little episode can be made general, they are that metaphor and meaning are indeed two different things, and that the former is not a deviant type but a correlate of the latter. If we grant Davidson's identification of meaning with translatability, then the conclusion would be that metaphor falls outside the scope of translatability. In plain speech, it is the words we translate, not the metaphor. This is not the chauvinistic or destructive claim that it can be taken to be, that metaphor is particular to one language or even to one speaker; but it prompts the question in how far translation is conservative of force. The translation of a metaphorical expression is very likely to yield another metaphor: 'les voiles tourbillonnantes du soleil' or 'die wirbelnden Schleier der Sonne' are likely to prompt the same interpretation as in English. But this cannot be taken for granted. As Davidson states, 'there is no test for metaphor that does not call for taste.'<sup>12</sup>

9. Arguably, it is this *subjective* element that makes the pragmatic interpretation of metaphor particularly difficult. (Here Davidson talks about taste; he also speaks of oraculation, mental images,

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<sup>12</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 245

Gestalt switches, and even ‘dreamwork’.) This is not the same as the ‘non-propositional’. There are many things that you can do with words that are not themselves propositional in character: the sentences ‘I hereby proclaim you husband and wife’, ‘that’s tasty!’, ‘could you spare me ten dollars?’ do not by themselves constitute a marriage, a compliment and a request, but only do so when certain actions are performed concomitantly. But these cases are not much of a problem to pragmatics, precisely *because* there are actions and situations concomitant to them. They *are* a problem to the translator: the literal translation of a request in Japanese would probably be a joke in English, and the literal translation of ‘I hereby declare you husband and wife’ would not be the right phrase to proclaim a marriage in Japanese. Still this is not so much because the literal translation would not be *recognizable*, but because speech acts involve all kinds of conventional phrases, idiom, polite expressions and the like. To some extent, these are matters of taste; but although it can be painstaking to find the correct politeness phrase, it is not difficult to fit the politeness phrase into a pragmatic model for a certain speech community.

The problem with metaphor is different. Metaphors do not work on account of ‘concomitant actions’, but of words. The problem in retaining them in translation is not in knowing the conventional phrase but in finding the extensional equivalent – which is the same problem as with literal descriptions. But the metaphor does not *fit* in the extensional model any more than it fits in the contextual model. If there is any model for explaining metaphor in Davidson’s philosophy at all, it is a *causal* model; after all, Davidson talks about what a metaphor ‘causes us’ to notice. However, such a model would have to cover what goes on in the imagination, and this is a domain of our experience that is not obviously ‘like’ either reason or nature.

The problem is that even when the content of imagination has nothing to do with facts or with reasons, so that it has no element that Davidson calls ‘cognitive’, it is still part of what goes on in the mind. If there was a causal model linking words to states of consciousness, that would go a long way towards a physicalist reduction of meaning. A model of conscious states that covers only those states without cognitive content would be a very poor model indeed. Davidson’s doctrine of ‘Anomalous Monism’, which states that descriptions of the mental in terms of content and in terms of physical states are irreducible to one another,<sup>13</sup> renders what goes on in the imagination inscrutable.

10. But *is* metaphor really something that goes on in the imagination? Davidson seems to take this for granted, given his talk of images they intimate, things they lead us to see, insights they inspire likenesses, pictures, and his description of metaphor as the ‘dreamwork’ of language. But for someone who does not endorse a ‘picture theory’ of truth and meaning, there is no obvious way to relate words to mental pictures.

Wilfrid Sellars, whose convictions on T-sentences, the nature of the ‘sphere of reasons’ and the causal

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<sup>13</sup> See ‘Mental Events’ in *Essays on Actions and Events*

relation between the world and our beliefs are closely similar (and importantly precedent) to Davidson's, said that our words 'picture' the world the way a seismograph pictures an earthquake: the basis of language is being conditioned to apply a certain expression to a certain situation.<sup>14</sup> But this picture is not a mental picture, and these pictures are not meanings. It is only with the development of a *metalanguage* in which these expressions can be called *true* that they acquire *meaning*, for meanings, according to Sellars, exist only within the sphere of reasons. Still, this distinction between meaning and picturing entails that an adequate picture can yield a false sentence, and vice versa. Correct observations can be phrased in terms of sunrises, phlogiston theory and Newtonian physics; nonsense can be produced even in the best of possible languages. Richard Rorty, in 'Representation, Social Practice and Truth', considers this the crucial difference between Sellars and Davidson, because it makes truth relative to a conceptual scheme. Rorty defines the difference as follows:

For Sellars, the primitive animists and the Aristotelians employed referring expressions most of which did not pick out entities in the world, and the same may be true of *us* (...). For Davidson, everybody has always talked about mostly real things, and has made mostly real statements. The only difference between primitive animists and us, or us and the Galactics, is that the latecomers can make a few extra true statements which their ancestors did not know how to make (and avoid a few falsehoods). But these little extras (...) are just icing on the cake.<sup>15</sup>

I do not think the difference is all that crucial for a theory of metaphor. Sellars does not make truth depend on adequacy as a picture, but the other way round; and he does not fail to distinguish sharply between the two. So even though he speaks of modes of picturing as 'conceptual schemes', and presents them as some sort of intermediate stage between meaning and the world, he never claims that they make us perceive an incommensurably different world, and his theory of meaning meets the Davidsonian standard of translatability. Sure enough, Davidson, too, has a problem with counting statements about phlogiston true, even when they are accurate.

Why I think the notion of picturing is important for a theory of metaphor, then, is not because it calls Davidson's model of language and cognition into question, but because it prompts the question of how such pictures are made.

### **III. Language and Imagination**

11. Here the problem with metaphor is that it makes words occur in conditions which are not quite those under which we learned how to use them. The model for language acquisition, with Davidson as with Sellars, is roughly that we observe expressions in a situation, isolate what the expression applies to, perceive that the expression is composed of constituent parts, parse it up, and then rearrange these

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<sup>14</sup> See chapter V of *Science and Metaphysics*, and 'Some Reflections on Language Games', 'Truth and "Correspondence"' in *Science, Perception and Reality*

<sup>15</sup> *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 159



constituent parts to form novel expressions. This last step – which linguists describe as *language creativity*, and logicians as *compositionality* – has received by far the least of their attention. Sellars compares the formation of sentences to a seismograph record, and Davidson applies a stochastic model of decision-making in ‘Belief and the Basis of Meaning’.<sup>16</sup> Why the words are recombined in an expression the way they are is a question that is passed over in silence.

Part of the answer comes pat: the correct phrase is determined by what the speaker knows, wants, and expects from the audience. For every act of communication, there are infinite options but some will be more likely to strike home than others. There is, of course, no general law to cover these practical considerations but there are good commonsensical rules of thumb for how to do things with words. For Davidson, the case is no different for unconventional use: in ‘James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty’ he makes the point about the extreme case of *Finnegans Wake*.

[W]e are forced to share in the annihilation of old meanings and the creation – not really *ex nihilo*, but on the basis of our stock of common lore – of a new language. All communication involves such joint effort to some degree (...). Joyce takes us back to the foundations and origins of communication; he puts us in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture, to assume the perspective of someone who is an alien or an exile.<sup>17</sup>

All this is mum and apple pie, but it does not explain why ‘Atom, Adam, etym’ is such a wonderfully concise expression for... (well yes, for *what?*), what ‘common lore’ is involved in ‘the sun’s whirling veils’, or how language can make us assume an alien perspective.

I know that *atoms* are, at least in what James Joyce may have known of physics, the building blocks of our universe; that *Adam* is the biblical ancestor of us all, and that his name means *Man* in Hebrew; and that *etymology* is the science of tracing words back in history. (It took a dictionary to find out that *etymos* means in Greek means *true* or *real*; and although Joyce knew no Greek, it was his habit to look up such things.) Furthermore, the three are together in a phrase, and the words look and sound very much alike: a vowel, a dental, a vowel, an *m*. There is an obvious suggestion that the three are more than similar, that they form a trinity – and knowing that Joyce used Giambattista Vico’s model of three stages of development all throughout *Finnegans Wake*, we can take it for a summary of world history: first matter, then life, then language and/or truth. As for the second example, I know that clouds hide (part of) the sun from sight and that veils hide (part of) the face and eyes from sight; that *whirling veils* are the typical characteristic of a veil dance, in which suggestion and glancing through the veils is part of the excitement; and that clouds also, in a literal sense, *whirl*, when the wind is strong. So we can see a similarity between clouds passing swiftly, and veils in a veil dance. All this is neat and clean inferential knowledge, but the problem is whether the words make us *perceive* things differently.

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<sup>16</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 145-7. The model is used on the behalf of the interpreter, but it is the speaker’s intended meaning that the model applies to.

<sup>17</sup> *Truth, Language, and History*, 157

12. Even without a picture theory of truth, it is obvious that language influences perception. After all, to make a report about things you must recognize them. So having a word will tune your attention to different aspects of reality, and having a 'life-world' will make you perceive things as things and not as bundles of impressions. The mechanisms that make us understand and form novel sentences crucially involve some capacity to identify things, and some correlate of this can be 'brought to mind' in the imagination. How exactly this works we do not know, and we know the mechanisms can fail, but it doesn't really matter unless we involve it in our language game. There are some states of the mind that are introspectively identifiable as beliefs, intentions, speculations, deliberations and the like, and these can be described quite well in terms of the related states of affairs and actions, but some part of experience simply can't. Why is it, for instance, that we can recognize a face much better than we can describe it? Why is the right word 'on the tip of my tongue'?

For Davidson, the problem with 'explaining' metaphor is of the same type. It is like explaining a joke. I can tell you all the background information you need and still you may find that 'Of course the earth is round. What else should the Gods play football with?' is not funny. About 'the sun's whirling veils', I can tell you that clouds are translucent, that they hide the sun from sight when they pass by, that 'whirling' can apply to clouds as well as veils, etc. But all this serves to bring off the effect, not to convince you that the sun really carries veils.

Still, what this interpretation describes are properties of clouds and veils, not states of mind. And there seems to be something in the words that plays Humpty Dumpty with us: for how did we know that the metaphor was about clouds in the first place? They were not mentioned. Is it because it didn't make sense to take the expression literally, that we wondered what things in relation to the sun could be described as 'veils'? (It could also be that 'The Sun' is the nickname of a veil dancer. Or the 'whirling veils' could be a mock description of gutter press sensationalism.) This would be the same process as with Mrs. Malaprop's 'allegories', except that we don't think it is a malapropism, and so we look for something that has properties like those of veils and not a word that sounds like 'veils'.

13. But what would be a description of the 'effect'? Do I develop mental images for clouds and whirling veils and then put them in a mental blender, so that I get an image I did not dream up before? Or do I develop the two images simultaneously, so that cloud image shares in the emotional connotations of the veil dance image? Do I develop trains of associations? All this is possible, but it cannot be made procedural. My mental images can be radically different from yours and still apply to the same words and objects. I may not find quite the same things exciting as you do, and even though metaphor makers may have a propensity for terms with strong emotional connotations, less pathetic ones like 'twiggy fingers' and 'use your walnuts' are no worse metaphors for that. With associations, there is no limit to idiosyncrasy. There is some appeal to these faculties in that the hearer has to figure out what these 'veils' may be, and with specifically 'poetic' metaphors the trick is to keep the effect going. But I may also use a metaphor simply because I have no better word at my disposal ('the car

shouted at me', says the child. 'No, it *hooted*')<sup>18</sup>, and you also appeal to my imagination in making reports as *unmetaphorically* as possible (as in giving directions).

14. As Davidson would have it, it is likely that people produce similar mental images, because there must be something in their minds that not only *responds* to experienced reality, but also *creates* novel sentences from that experience. *Something* in the mind must make us apply words to objects. But the meaning of a word is not given in such a process: for nothing in the perceptible world tells us how to apply them. As *material things*, our thoughts and expressions are caused by other things; but their *conceptual content* exists relative to the whole of our knowledge, and our capacity to ascribe truth.

In Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, mental phenomena figure as 'theoretical' entities: they are introduced at some point into the language game to explain verbal behaviour, and to lend support to our arguments and reports. The jargon in which they are described is modelled on our 'metalanguage', the jargon in which we discuss the truth and meaning of expressions.

This, of course, is not a historical description of how people came to have minds. Sellars himself calls it a myth, the 'Myth of Jones'.<sup>19</sup> But the point is that to classify as cognitive content, our thoughts must be described in a public language. On this point Rorty and Davidson agree with Sellars: what you say about your thoughts I can say as well, and although you know them better you can describe them wrongly all the same. In that sense, there are no self-evident 'privileged representations'.<sup>20</sup> I can *hide* my thoughts only when I know how to *show* them, and whatever else goes on in the mind is a buzz for which there is no 'theory' so far.

15. Davidson's talk of 'insights', his mention of the Delphic Oracle, and his statement that 'no proposition expresses what I have led you to see'<sup>21</sup> all suggest that there is something 'deep' going on. But we imagine, associate, and feel emotion all the time. The one thing that matters about metaphor seems to be that I appreciate it – when it passes unnoticed, there is no effect whatsoever. The effect can be there unintentionally and it can fail where it is intended. In this, a metaphor is like something funny or beautiful. The net result of Davidson's theory is that there is little to say about matters of taste: we end up describing more accurately the things we find funny or beautiful, or trying to describe our state of mind.

There is an analogy here with both language creativity, and concept formation. There are many ways in which we can say the same thing, and no amount of knowledge will give conclusive reasons for choosing one particular sentence-structure as most apt to the purpose when there is no convention proscribing a standard phrase. There is no way to determine what exactly words 'stand for' from the

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<sup>18</sup> I take the example from Avishai Margalit and L. Jonathan Cohen, 'The Role of Inductive Reasoning in the Interpretation of Metaphor' in *Semantics of Natural Language*, 723

<sup>19</sup> See sections XII-XVI of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*

<sup>20</sup> See *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. IV

<sup>21</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 263

situations in which they occur in sentences. The choice of the right phrase, and the proper use of a word, are motivated by taste.

16. This is a feature of language use that is hard to accommodate in Davidson's notion of meaning as translatability. According to Davidson, meanings depend upon norms, and rationality is a domain *sui generis* because it is inherently normative. But this presupposes a distinction between public norms and private taste which leaves the latter literally 'meaningless'. To drop a big name, it is Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing.

I think this distinction is nothing more than a convenience. If there is no such thing as a language 'defined by shared rules and conventions', what a language learner acquires is a sense rather than a mechanism for proper usage. If an element of taste is crucial to our capacity for using language, then it is not 'outside' the domain of reason.

#### IV. Meaning and Inference

17. There is an obvious problem in the idea that true beliefs are verified only by other true beliefs: how can such beliefs still have anything to do with experience? If reason is a domain *sui generis*, what saves it from being 'free spinning'?

These questions about the philosophy of Davidson and Sellars have elicited two very scholastic responses from John McDowell and Robert Brandom, the 'Pittsburgh Hegelians'. John McDowell has claimed that 'there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world'<sup>22</sup>: when I say X, I mean X, not 'my ideas about X' or something. In this view, there is no limit to what can classify as 'conceptual content': the whole of our experience is conceptual. Still, this does not set rationality 'free spinning': 'The constraint comes from outside *thinking*, but not from outside what is *thinkable*.'<sup>23</sup> McDowell's solution is that we should not think of reason as an anomaly, but as a *second nature*, which human beings develop in a process of acculturation or *Bildung*.

Robert Brandom has developed a theory of 'discursive commitment' or 'inferentialism', which propounds that meanings and the relations between sentences are established in a process of explaining what we mean. (His main titles are *Making it Explicit* and *Articulating Reasons*.) *Intentions* and *concepts* cannot explain linguistic competence, for they emerge only when we go metalinguistic.<sup>24</sup> We do not have a 'hard-wired' capacity for logic: the rules for valid deduction emerge in the practice of explaining what we mean. For this practical reasoning, Brandom lends from Sellars the notion of *material inference*.

I cannot go deeply into these issues here. Neither Brandom nor McDowell – nor Sellars, for that

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<sup>22</sup> *Mind and World*, 27

<sup>23</sup> *idem*, 28

<sup>24</sup> *Making it Explicit*, 80-1, 233

matter – spends a word on metaphor. Still McDowell's view on second nature, and Brandom's on inference, bring to our attention how problematic Davidson's delimitation of the conceptual is; for what does it mean for a sentence to be made true by other sentences? In so far as I would emphasize the 'making it explicit' rather than the 'acculturation', my concern is to 'Brandomize' Davidson's theory of metaphor. But I find something missing in both. McDowell's notion of second nature, and Brandom's notion of discursive practice, both serve to understand reason from the way things are. In my view, we have only begun to reason when we develop a conception of how things *should be*. To elaborate this point with regard to metaphor, in the remainder of this paper I will lay down some desiderata for a theory of meaning.

18. Avishai Margalit and L. Jonathan Cohen (in a paper under Davidson's editorship) have listed three arguments against the sharp distinction of literal meaning and metaphor:

First, so far as synchronic linguistics is concerned, native speakers often move from literal to metaphorical speech, and back again, without any sense of strain or any bizarreness reactions in their hearers. [...] Secondly, so far as diachronic linguistics is concerned, the importance of metaphor as a source of new dictionary meanings is well known. But why should one suppose that [...] it operates from outside, as it were? It is much more plausible to see the death of a dead metaphor as a readjustment, or a boundary-shift, within language. [...] Thirdly, so far as the psycholinguistics of language-learning is concerned the picture is grossly falsified if metaphor is regarded as a special form of linguistic sophistication. [...] The deliberate use of metaphor, in the awareness that it is such, is no doubt a phenomenon of adult *parole*. But metaphorical sentences are as much part of the *langue* that children acquire as are non-metaphorical ones.<sup>25</sup>

According to Margalit and Cohen, the capacity to interpret metaphor is the same as the capacity to understand novel sentences. There is an indeterminacy in what words apply to, and we can use general terms only because we have adverbs, indexicals, tenses, location terms and the like to specify them. Prior to understanding what words denote, we must understand their role in the sentence: we must perceive the sentence as structured, and assign a grammatical category to its constituent parts. Then the meaning of the term can be determined inductively, with more or less certainty depending on how many relevant variables are specified. Note that for Margalit and Cohen, inductive support is 'a type of timeless relation between propositions which is gradable or rankable but not measurable.'<sup>26</sup> This is precisely the type of relation for which Sellars introduced the term 'material inference', in his early paper 'Inference and Meaning'.

Margalit and Cohen's conclusion is that '[t]he existence of metaphor, like that of a sentence, is a feature of *langue*, not of *parole*.'<sup>27</sup> This is the exact opposite of Davidson's contention that 'metaphor

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<sup>25</sup> *Semantics of Natural Language*, 722-3

<sup>26</sup> *idem*, 725

<sup>27</sup> *idem*, 738

belongs exclusively to the domain of use.’ For Davidson, a view like Margalit and Cohen’s fails in that it confuses metaphor and ambiguity. You can use a metaphor to fill a gap in your language, but if you succeed in that it will lose its effect as a metaphor. ‘Once upon a time, I suppose, rivers and bottles did not, as they do now, literally have mouths.’<sup>28</sup> But ‘old fools are babes again’ remains a metaphor no matter how often we read *King Lear*. From this perspective, the child who says ‘the car shouted at me’, or in a more bizarre case calls a toothbrush or a button a ‘dog’ because it is hairy, does so for lack of better words. (Quantum physicists do so when they say that ‘quarks’ have ‘colour’ and ‘taste’.)

19. Indeed, shouting cars and canine buttons are not very effective as metaphors. But that is because children know too little to have ‘taste’ in these matters. What is important about Margalit and Cohen’s paper is that we can make metaphors because we can make sentences, and that adults making metaphors do the same thing as children extending the use of a word, only playfully. A child may not have learned yet that shouting applies only to verbal noise; an adult knows damn well that the sun does not wear veils. But in both cases the choice of the right word depends on inductive knowledge, or if we be Brandomites, material inference. It is the kind of reasoning that allows us to say: ‘X is to the west of Y, so Y is to the east of X’, or ‘lightning strikes, so thunder will be heard soon’, or ‘I am a bank employee going to work, so I shall wear a necktie’.

When I use a metaphor, I am still under a discursive commitment to explain what I mean. When I say that you are a pig and explain, ‘I am talking metaphorically’, that is not enough. When I say ‘you are pink’ that is inappropriate. A sufficient reason would be that your table manners are ghastly, or you have been very uncouth to someone. Of course, it never becomes a logically valid deductive argument. But that is not the way in which our beliefs about the world are coherent either. For someone who has abjured the analytic/synthetic-distinction, like Davidson, the processing that Sellars called ‘material inference’ is even more crucial than it is to Sellars. To have perceived this, I think, is one of Brandom’s best insights.

20. There is reason to doubt whether categorial grammar, as Margalit and Cohen present it, is the most adequate model for how a sentence is structured. As a competent speaker, I can make sentences with no verb or with no noun, use a noun for a verb, an adverb for a noun, a name for a kind term etc. Wallace Chafe has emphasized the constructive role of idiom for linguistic competence, and Adèle Goldberg has developed a model of ‘constructions’ in which the distinction between grammar and lexicon no longer obtains. Still it holds that in order to assign meaning to a sentence, we must perceive it as structured, and to perceive it as structured is to perceive it as motivated.

For Brandom, this amounts to an ‘instrumentalist’ position he rejects: that intentions can explain

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<sup>28</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 252

meanings. His own project, in *Making it Explicit*, is to explain how meanings emerge in the language game itself, as we draw inferences, substitute expression, and make ‘anaphoric’ statements (saying ‘that’, talking ‘about’, quotation, reflexive pronouns, and the like). Ultimately, this ‘inferentialism’ relies upon Wittgenstein’s rock-bottom argument: ‘Habe ich die Begründungen erschöpft, so bin ich nun auf dem harten Felsen angelangt, und mein Spaten biegt sich zurück. Ich bin dann geneigt zu sagen: “So handle ich eben.”’<sup>29</sup>

I suppose that Man’s fall into language, according to Brandom, was like this: first our ancestors made verbal reactions, then they started imitating each other and developed patterns, and when these patterns became part of their life they went metalinguistic; so they grew to have questions and answers, a lexicon and a grammar; and then finally Jones popped up to give them words for what went on in their minds. It is this final step from meanings to thoughts that Sellars describes in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. I do not know whether this story has anything to do with historical reality; but my point is that our pre-Jonesian ancestors cannot have had questions and answers, yes and no without having motivations. Nor could they have analysed sentences into constituent parts without treating them as constructs; nor could they take expressions as having meaning without understanding them as *acts*.

What I am arguing, then, is that Brandom’s ‘semantic expressivism’ does not get us beyond the conclusion of Davidson’s ‘A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning, and Action’: that the dependencies among our basic propositional attitudes are such that we must ‘avoid the assumption that we can come to grasp them – or intelligibly attribute them – one at a time’, but that it is ‘in principle possible to arrive at all of them at once’.<sup>30</sup> The Myth of Jones is all right as it goes. But it is part of a functional theory of concepts, rather than a theory of concept formation.

21. I think we need another myth – the Myth of Kurt. Imagine that sometime after Jones, Kurt grows up in a Wittgensteinian community where people give reasons for what they do, and then when they run out of reasons they say: ‘well, that’s just as I do’. Now Kurt is a troublemaker. Whenever he gets this response, he keeps on asking ‘yes, but *why?*’ And since there are also Rortians in this community, they tell him to get lost. Or they reply, ‘why do you ask?’

And then at some point, Kurt invents the word for *should*. He asks his fellow cavemen whether this is as it *should* be, whether they *should* really do this, etc. He prompts them to develop a conception of how things should be. At first they don’t find any use for that. They reply, ‘well, I don’t know’. Then

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<sup>29</sup> *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 217

<sup>30</sup> *Problems of Rationality*, 166. In *Making it Explicit*, Brandom goes at some pains to point out that a model for action that includes beliefs and intentions can also cover the behaviour of infants and animals – countering the familiar reproach against Sellars’ theory that it is ‘unfair to babies’. But we should not confuse babies with cavemen. Linguists tend to prefer babies over cavemen for the obvious reason that babies can be observed; but how infants develop propositional attitudes within an established speech community may not run parallel to the emergence of such attitudes in general. In other words, we may not be observing the ‘birth of language’ time and again.

Kurt goes Socratic and asks them what is knowledge. His fellows give reasons and draw inferences; they know how to argue. Now Kurt tells them that here is a possible use for *should*. When you are making a claim and knowing it might be wrong, you are speaking of something that *should* be. And then Kurt presents his master insight. When you do something or want something, he tells his fellows, you could also have done or wanted something different. You don't just do it. What you do, and want, is something that you think *should* be.

Suppose, further, that Kurt has more than one talent. He is not only the second philosopher after Jones; he is also an artist. He teaches his fellows how to decorate their cave with paintings, carve statuettes, and use the pitch and rhythm of their voices to make music. He shows them that language is more remarkable and more effective if it is used artfully and imaginatively, and how such language use can be interesting in its own right. And then his first followers invent the philosophy of art: they talk about a work of art and one of them asks: 'well, shouldn't it be like this?'

What Kurt has taught his fellows is what *ideals* are, and how to *argue* about them. He has introduced a new element in the game of giving and asking for reasons, which is the *imagination*, and so turned a practice of responding adequately into one of *making it explicit*. Soon, the post-Kurt community leaves its cave. Reflecting on their former Wittgensteinian quietism, the heirs of Kurt feel that only now they have become truly rational.

22. This parable itself doesn't prove anything. Nobody denied that creativity and imagination are important. But what would a theory of meaning in this spirit look like?

Consider again one of the questions from which we started: why only those 'peculiar entities' called sentences are liable to propositional ascription. One answer is that truth is a word, that it is applied in truth-sentences, and that to call something true we must name it, so that any nonverbal truth would be as nonsensical as a private language. But that is to put the cart before the horse.

Another approach is to ask what else the notion of truth is good for. I do not think it adds much to a picture, plutonium, love or a music performance to be true independently of judgement. We can *call* them true, most often in the sense of 'real' or 'good'. I have no quarrel with such uses, as long as they are not confused with truth in a semantic model and do not picture truth as an entity.

A third possibility would be to consider as a central feature the fact that a statement is structured. This is such a truism that most theories simply take it for granted, and focus on *how* it is structured. But the fact remains that to make one expression pertain to something specific, and make it express something that other expressions don't, we must take the difference to be structural. As soon as we distinguish one type of motivated noise from another, we get metalinguistic. I am quite willing to concede to Brandom *et al.* that this structuring capacity is not pre-given, that it comes together with a metalanguage, and that its basis is idiomatic rather than logical. But this is not at odds with the claim that the structure of expressions is as crucial as its use, and that when we have a language we have metalanguage.



23. Margalit and Cohen have propounded that in order to perceive metaphor as a part of *langue*, we must perceive every well-formed sentence as meaningful, and can allow no further conditions for having meaning than well-formedness.<sup>31</sup> This, I think, is not convincing because they want as to arrive at the criteria for well-formedness inductively, and so the inductive process yields first a rigid categorial grammar, and then ambiguous meanings. Davidson has argued that people can arrive at similar sentences by different procedures, and can put structure into pidgin.

Gareth Evans presents a different proposal in his discussion of Davidson in ‘Semantic Structure and Logical Form.’ He writes that although it is ‘perfectly natural’ to present ‘intuitions about semantic functioning as intuitions about syntactic position’<sup>32</sup>, this is to confuse a theorist’s model and a speaker’s competence. ‘However, there is no need to make semantic proposals this way [...]. It would seem preferable to short-circuit the canonical language, constructing an interpretational semantics for the natural language directly, where this is possible.’<sup>33</sup>

This, I think, would render the speaker’s competence meaningless. Evans’ argument is that we have no semantic model for syntactic modifications: we cannot discern ‘tall’ in ‘taller than’. Therefore, these ‘intuitions’ misrepresent the distinction at the beginning of the essay:

The validity of some inferences is to be explained by reference to the meanings of the particular expressions occurring in them, while that of other inferences is due, rather, to the way in which the sentences are constructed out of their parts.<sup>34</sup>

For Evans, the distinction is not one between meaning and syntax, but between logical form and semantic structure. His thesis is that the former depends upon the latter, and that this ‘structurally valid inference’ must be explained from semantics rather than syntax. I think he is quite right about the predominance of structurally valid inference, only his notion of it urgently needs to be Brandomized. If we want to make sense of our capacity to generate metaphor, there is little use for the notion that sentences have two categorically different structures. There is not one way to structure sentences, nor two, but many. The same features of Evans’ notion of semantic structure that make it detrimental to metaphor make it too strong a restriction upon our language creativity.

Sure enough, the metaphors of children and primitives are appreciated mainly by parents and linguists. But this does not give either of them categorically different minds. Whenever we have structure enough to reason, we have metaphor.

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<sup>31</sup> *Semantics of Natural Language*, 737-8

<sup>32</sup> *Truth and Meaning*, 220

<sup>33</sup> *idem*, 221

<sup>34</sup> *idem*, 199

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